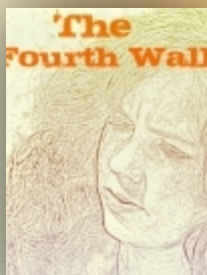




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The Fourth Wall



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Chapter 1 by Dusty Haynes

The clock on my desk met my drowsy gaze, defiantly displaying the time: 9:45 AM. Only 9:45. It felt like it had been at least 4 hours since I dragged myself out of bed, threw on this stupid suit and stumbled my way into work. In reality I had only arrived an hour and forty five minutes ago.

I forced myself to turn back to my computer screen where numbers, graphs, and reports waited patiently for my attention. I clicked through a few of them before the crushing boredom drove my attention to the floor to ceiling window across the room.

The city was beautiful this time of the morning. The sunlight gave all of the buildings a warm orange glow. I could almost see the crispness of the air and I knew that millions of people were 30 stories below me, starting their day.

I hope they all have something better planned than this, I thought as I looked with pity at my co-workers. Many of them have worked their whole lives to get here on this floor and most of them will die having accomplished little else.

Back to the clock. 9:45 AM. It's gonna be a long day.

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Before I could finish my thought, I looked around the room again. No one else had noticed. I focused, waiting, listening. Seconds before I felt it again.

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Yep, time to go!

I reached into my desk and retrieved my lunch for the day: my wife's delicious beef and vegetable soup. It was a shame I would never get to eat it.

I opened my thermos, hovered over my trash can and started heaving loudly while simultaneously pouring my chunky soup in the trashcan. I could hear my coworkers gasp.

"Jesus, Jeffries!" Mr. Besnos, my boss, quickly came my way as I hid my trashcan. "Are you okay?"

"I...I think so," I replied, out of breath. "I just need to...go to the bathroom for...a second."

"Just take the day Jake," Mr. Besnos backed away, "or we'll all be yacking."

I agreed and quickly made my way into the elevator, rode it up to the 69th floor and took the stairs to the roof. I started undressing as I felt another big rumble. This time, it was closer and shook the pebbles covering the roof. I threw on my mask as the purple, black, and green of my costume emerged from under my suit.

The communicator inside my mask was alerting me that I had a message. With a click of my finger Seargent Warwick's voice filled my head.

"I don't know where you are, but we need you bad." An explosion could be heard in the background. "Somebody is blowing up subway cars. Two so far. Only a few people injured, but if there is a third bomb somewhere who knows where it is or what kind of damage it could cause."

With a running start, I leapt over the side of the roof and took off into the air; weaving down, over, and around, up, and down between the high rises. I descended to street level and clicked my ear again as I zipped above the people's heads.

"Warwick, do you have anymore info?"

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"Security footage?" I needed more.

"They're running facial-rec now. Nothing yet. They need you at Styke and Watts. They have some folks trapped and could use your muscle."

I zipped up, over six blocks and back down. I dove down the stairs into the subway and onto the tracks. In front of me was a mangled and charred lump of metal and wire, sparks spraying the air.

"Over here" screamed a paramedic standing on the platform. In a flash I was next to him. "We have a woman and a young boy inside the train car. The woman is awake and responsive but the child is unconscious. They were pinned on the floor after the blast caused the roof to cave." I knelt down to a tiny opening in the side of what was left of the car.

"What's your name, Miss?" I needed to make sure she was still with me.

"Renee," her breathing was shallow and her voice was weak. There wasn't much time.

"Nice to meet you Renee. I'm Nitro. You're gonna be okay, alright? Just stay really still. Got it?"

"Sir," said the paramedic in a hushed tone, "you should know that when the woman was pinned, the car crumpled in on her legs and they were severed. The pressure of the wreckage is all that's keeping her from bleeding out."

Dread bubbled in the pit of my stomach but my mind was racing.

The paramedics would struggle to stop the bleeding in time. Nearest hospital is on 7th. Approximately 2 minute flight from here. Once i free her, her heart will begin pumping blood out of her body. She'll be dead in minutes. But how many? Can I make it?

I placed my hands at the opening in the steel and took a deep breath. With a twitch of my muscles I barely knew I had made, the train car roof flipped safely away and Renee was in my arms. Behind me the paramedics tended to the boy while I worked harder than I ever had to

close the distance between us and the hospital.

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I had never flown so fast. I was a blur dodging up and through the nooks and crannies of my city. Windows blew out in my wake. I arrived at the hospital a minute and ten seconds after I left the subway.

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The ER was ready, thanks to the paramedic who called ahead, and an unconscious Renee was quickly wheeled away. I stumbled for a second in the ER waiting room trying to catch my breath when my communicator beeped in my ear.

"We got something." Warwick squawked, "Facial-rec came back to a Ryan Nelson. He was a patient at Cortatt until a couple of days ago when he vanished from his room."

"I'm on it." I said. I was immediately back in the air above the city. I tapped my communicator twice.

"Nitro to Sapphire. Please tell me you're awake?"

"I wasn't until stuff started blowing up! My apartment shook so bad I have bits of my ceiling in my cereal! What do you need?"

"Ryan Nelson escaped from Cortatt a week ago. I need to know everything about him. Addresses, employers, spouses. Everything." The sound of fingers on a computer keyboard filled the brief silence. "Got him. Last known address was 187 Winkler Ave."

Without a pause, I changed direction in the air and sped toward the address.

"No family, no job, no priors until he checked himself into the institute a week ago," Sapphire chuckled, "He said God was talking to him."

"Thanks Saph, keep looking." I landed on the roof of the small house at the address she gave. No car in the driveway and no sounds coming from inside. The back door was unlocked so I slipped inside. The place was in terrible shape. The walls in the living room were covered from top to bottom in writing. Some spots were too small to read, but others, including one giant spot in the center of the ceiling were clear:

The Eye Watches

A shattered glass coffee table sat in the middle of the room with dozens of papers piled on top. Each had more scribbles. I picked up one and saw a few lines.

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I know he's listening. I can't

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I do it. I won't do it.

As I stood reading Nelson's written ramblings, the front and back doors burst open and a SWAT team poured in, guns drawn. I raised my hands in surrender as Warwick pushed his way through the troops.

"Stand down! Stand down!" He called, "you really should warn me before you do this kind of thing." The SWAT team filed out as he grabbed the paper from my hand and scanned it. "Wow, he is a nut job. How long do you think he's been planning this?"

"I'm not sure he was," I said, "A week ago he sought help; checked himself into Cortatt. Why would he check himself into a mental institute just to escape again?"

"Hell if I know," Warwick shrugged, "we've stopped all public transit in the city and have bomb squads sweeping the trains. Nelson's face is on every newscast so hopefully we'll get a tip."

"Let me know when you hear something, will you?" I took off back into the sky and decided to swing back by the hospital. I needed to make sure Renee was okay. When I arrived, a young doctor noticed me and stopped me at the door.

"Can I help you sir?"

"I brought in a young woman earlier named Renee. How is she?"

"I'm sorry sir, I can't release any information to you unless you're family."

"I just want to know if she's alive," I argued. The doctor lowered her voice and leaned in.

"I'm sorry. We tried. There was just too much blood loss." I stumbled a bit but caught myself. Her words hurt. I had been at this a long time, over a decade. Defending the weak, protecting the innocent. I told her she would be okay. I failed her. I failed them all.

Just then the ER waiting room TV showed the subway tunnel where I had been earlier. The paramedic was talking to a reporter.

"Can you tell us what happened here?"

See more of Story Wars

The paramedic paused, te

young boy

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led over the face of a

"The city's gone to hell," he said. The clock at the bottom of the screen read 10:45 AM.

Damn. It's going to be a long day.

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